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Introduction

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Introduction

Héliane Ventura

1 This is the first time that the *Journal of the Short Story in English* has entirely dedicated a special issue to Alice Munro's short fiction, although a great number of individual stories have been examined throughout the preceding issues, with the first one (1983) already encapsulating a critical article on *Lives of Girls and Women* (1971) and *Who Do You Think You Are* (1978).[1]

2 By 2010, Munro has had thirteen collections of short stories anthologized, spanning more than forty years of excellence in the field. From her first published collection, *Dance of the Happy Shades* (1968), to her last one so far, *Too Much Happiness* (2009), Munro has ceaselessly explored the *Lives of Girls and Women* and *The Progress of Love* from *Hateship, Friendship, Courtship, Loveship* [to] *Marriage* in the 19th, 20th, and 21st centuries, while resorting to the single form of the short story, of which she has become an exemplary practitioner. Her stories have themselves triggered off a bountiful critical production, from the first book-length volume by Judith Miller's *The Art of Alice Munro: Saying the Unsayable*, which was published in 1984 and collected the papers presented at the University of Waterloo first conference on her oeuvre, to the latest critical biography which thoroughly documents the history of the publication of her stories: Robert Thacker's *Alice Munro Writing Her Lives*, published in 2005. They have also been conducive to a large production of critical articles, as eloquently demonstrated by the updated bibliography included at the end of this issue.

3 This special issue collects contributions from Canada, France, Germany, and Italy and accommodates the critical examination of one or several stories from seven collections out of thirteen. From "The Peace of Utrecht" published in her first collection, the volume moves all the way up to the collection published in 2004, *Runaway*, while also considering *The Progress of Love* from 1986, *Friend of my Youth* from 1990, *The Love of a Good Woman* from 1998 and *Hateship, Friendship, Courtship, Loveship, Marriage* from 2001.

4 The volume is divided into three parts which correspond to at least three distinct methodological approaches. The first part entitled "The Complicity of Desire" focuses on the tropes of longing and belonging to expose the characters' restlessness and unfulfilled aspirations in their respective garrisons. Katrin Berndt explores the terrors

that are lurking behind the facades of small town from the perspective of the resurgence of Gothic elements in Munro's prose from the earlier to the later stories. Silvia Albertazzi adopts a sociological approach to expose Munro's scathing lucidity in the depiction of human relationship, through the analysis of two emblematic stories, "The Peace of Utrecht," and "Royal Beatings." Jennifer Murray concentrates on a surprisingly neglected 'mother' story in Munro's criticism, "Princess Ida," to focus on the text's encoding of the psychological forces of repression and sublimation, in the daughter's oedipal negotiation of her own relationship to the mother figure. Relying on the Lacanian notions of *Jouissance* and the Real, Claude Maisonnat reads "Eskimo" as a process of self-discovery undergone, more or less willingly, by the heroine on her trip to Honolulu for her vacation.

5 The second part of the volume, "The Erotics of Language", concentrates more particularly on the linguistic issues which underpin Munro's stories. Lynn Blin resorts to a linguistic approach to expose the secret strategies of Munro's language. Through the study of coordinators in "Friend of My Youth", she argues that the apparent merry-go-round of couples paves the way for another couple, a more transgressive one, the mother-daughter couple. Sabrina Francesconi concentrates on another story from *Friend of my Youth*, "Meneseteung," to demonstrate that names are sites of negotiation for identity, as well as for historical, political, and cultural issues. From "Meneseteung," to "Menace" and "Tongue" and the character of Almeda or possibly "Med(e)a," Munro questions, deconstructs, and subverts monolinguistic issues and the place of the author in society. Corinne Bigot lays the emphasis on the strategic use of silence in one particular story from *Runaway* precisely entitled "Silence" and theorizes the development of a poetics of silence in Munro's art.

6 The third part entitled "The Dialectics of Proximity and Distance" takes up the 2004 collection of stories, *Runaway*, to extend the analysis of "Silence" to the entire "Juliet" Trilogy and to the final story in the volume, "The Bear Came Over the Mountain." Ian Rae focuses on the influence of the classicist Anne Carson for the development of Munro's Hellenistic background to the collection while Agnes Scaillet investigates the self-betraying distance that Sarah Polley has taken from "The Bear Came Over the Mountain" in her filmic adaptation, entitled *Away from Her*. In the same story, Héliane Ventura underlines the ironically distanced approach to the ravages of aging, through the ambiguous aggrandizement of the protagonists: the transformation of Fiona into the Goddess Freya and that of Grant into a Skaldic poet.

7 This volume is not a hagiographic enterprise dedicated to the praise of one of the greatest short story writers in contemporary literature. One article, in particular, echoes some of the criticism which has been sometimes levelled at Munro's stories, highlighting Munro's astringent vision and unforgiving lucidity. Most contributions nevertheless refrain from either extolling or condemning the stories. They concentrate on the various ways through which Munro turns life into story, on a knack or need for self-dramatization or for "calling attention" to oneself, which many people in her family seem to have "in large and irresistible measure," as she herself declares in the first part of her collection from 2006, *The View from Castle Rock*. [2] These contributions lay the stress on a feminine aesthetics which is marked by its conversational mode, a vernacular ease, which is based on repetition with a difference. Most of the stories which have been analyzed here variously focus on the types of languages used in Munro's stories. They provide evidence of means of expression which were not

necessarily born of articulate language: body language, silence, or even slip of the tongue or slip of the pen which result in ambiguous homonymy or homophony. They differently argue that a Munro story is characterised by polysemy and heteronymy : it contains misnomers, grammatical mistakes and other happy "infelicities" which point towards another locus of meaning, secretly but intentionally encoded in between apparently ordinary language.

8 Suffice it to provide here two specific examples of Munro's misnomers or vernacular language, the title of one story, "Eskimo,"[3] and the mistaken past participle used by a nurse in "The Bear Came Over the Mountain," "wore" instead of "worn": "Old women going after the old men. Could be they're not so wore out, I guess."[4] With the use of the term "Eskimo" the former story doubly draws attention to alterity, since it resorts to an obsolete designation to accommodate the presence of a young Inuit in the diegesis at the same time as it documents the unheimlich transformation of a white, Anglo-Saxon airplane passenger into a voyeur during her journey of self-discovery. The latter story documents the transformation of a lady into a promiscuous Alzheimer patient: in both stories the misnomer has far-reaching reverberations; it allows truths that belong to the unconscious or cannot be directly expressed to come to the surface and destabilize our understanding of characters.

9 This volume is not meant to shed light on the history of the publication of the stories or reach a definite answer about Munro's fiction. It is meant to provide a new understanding of her oeuvre, based on attention to and close analysis of language: an understanding which is distinct from knowledge, and consequently open to debate and contestation. It reflects a different mode of understanding fiction: it demonstrates an inclination towards finding out meaning, rather than exhuming indisputable facts. It constitutes a re-assessment of Alice Munro's achievement which is also a re-evaluation of our own understanding of the issues, discursive, ethical, psychoanalytical and sociological, which are posed by her stories, just as they are posed by life.

NOTES

1. Marcienne Rocard, "Alice Munro : à mi-chemin entre la nouvelle et le roman", *The Journal of the Short Story in English*, volume 1, 1983: 103-112.

2. Alice Munro, *The View from Castle Rock*, London, Chatto & Windus, 2006, p. 20.

3. Alice Munro, *The Progress of Love*, Toronto, McClelland & Stewart, 1986.

4. Alice Munro, *Hateship, Friendship, Courtship, Loveship, Marriage*, Toronto, McClelland & Stewart, 2001, p. 293.

AUTHORS

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Héliane Ventura is Professor of Contemporary Literature in English at the University of Toulouse-Le-Mirail. Her research interests are focused on the relationship between words and images, the resurgence of myths from Antiquity in contemporary literature in English and more particularly on theoretical close readings of the contemporary short story in the English speaking world. She will be a Visiting Fellow at the Institute for Advanced Studies in the Humanities at the University of Edinburgh in 2010, working on the filiation between James Hogg's ballads and memoirs and Alice Munro's short stories.